

**THE GIFT OF YEARS: GROWING OLD GRACEFULLY.**

**Joan Chittister**

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*The Gift of Years* is indeed a gift for spiritual counsellors in every subspecialty. This engaging book will inspire personal work to deepen one's sense of spirit in and for later life as well as an indispensable resource for working with adults over 50, over 70, and over 100. The text encourages us to choose growth, joy and an outward perspective as we look to later life.

Joan Chittister has spoken out for social justice in person and through writings for many decades. Now, at age 70 on the threshold of old age herself, this esteemed Christian leader has turned her wise attention to the issues of later life. Her inter-faith vision of the mystery and promise of age is praised on the back cover by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim spiritual writers.

With a highly readable style, Chittister incorporates much of the psychology of aging informally, encompassing pre-retirement, active retirement, decline with more losses than gains, and preparation for dying. According to one of the key models in gerontology (Crowther, et al., 2002), older adults, with or without significant impairments, can age successfully if they avoid further health problems and excess disability, exercise mentally and physically daily, and engage with life. Positive spirituality, her focus, is the driving motivational force for the required life style changes and commitments involved in aging with continued vitality.

Like life, aging is a choice, a series of choices. The book guides the reader to reflect on their choices for aging with spirit by presenting a series of five-page chapters. These are designed to be read one per sitting in any order. Each chapter contains quotations, real-life stories, spiritual insights, and a structured ending: *the burden of these years is* – and *the blessing of these years is* –. The 40 chapters proffer expected topics such as Meaning, Adjustment, Relationships, Letting Go, Memories, Forgiveness, and Wisdom as well as topics likely to be more surprising to readers such as Accomplishment, Possibility, Dreams, Agelessness, and Future.

To quote some of the chapter-ending blessings of age:

- we know at last what really matters, and the world is waiting to hear it, if only we will make the effort and don't give in to our limitations.
- to have the opportunity to take on the role of thinker, of philosopher, of disputant, of interrogator, or spiritual guide in a world racing to nowhere, with no true human goal and no lived wisdom in sight.
- to become the fullness of ourselves. It comes to us in the nighttime of the soul to tell us to rise to new selves and fresh and exciting ways -- for our sake, of course, but for the sake of the rest of the world, as well.
- we can finally concentrate on all the things we have ever wanted to learn and know and, as a result, become an even more important, more focused, more

- spiritual person than we have ever really been before.
- we can come to understand that it is the quality of what we think and say that makes us valuable members of society, not how fast or busy we are.
  - the freedom to reach out to others, to do everything we can with everything in life that we have managed to develop all these years in both soul and mind for the sake of the rest of the human race.

Throughout, Chittister persistently, yet lightly, nudges us toward the view of age as a welcome (yes, welcome) call to spiritual growth because age brings us face to face with ourselves, offering “time to taste the essence of life rather than concern ourselves with its accessories.”

According to Chittister: “These are the capstone years, the time in which a whole new life is in the making again. But the gift of these years is not merely being alive – it is the gift of becoming more fully alive than ever.” Moreover, this growth toward the end of life creates a legacy for which the whole world awaits.

### References

Crowther, M. R., Parker, M. W., Achenbaum, W. A., Larimore, W. L., & Koenig, H. G. (2002). Rowe and Kahn’s Model of Successful Aging revisited: Positive spirituality—The forgotten factor. *The Gerontologist*, 42, 613-620.

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